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PICTURE CRITICISM.

THE dearth of rational criticism is a serious drawback to the progress of art among us. While our students are assimilating all that is to be learned in the foremost European schools and discovering, some of them, very remarkable talents, our art criticism is not progressing at a corresponding rate. There has been a change for the better in it, but it is only one of taste, based on a wider knowledge, certainly, but not a more exact. It is a change that has come over the public at large by which our art-criticism has benefited, and not the reverse, as should be the case.

The knowledge which enables the critic to lead his public and to keep abreast of current movements in art is possessed by very few. Most of our writers on art—the English included—have had no other than a literary or journalistic training; and hence it often happens that their admiration is won by a wretched pastiche in which they perceive something that reminds them of Titian or Giorgione, while a strong and lifelike work, animated by modern ideas and feelings, runs great risk of being passed by or perhaps condemned as a merely technical affair, devoid of spiritual significance.

This attitude is sometimes supported by arguments as absurd as one would expect them to be, but none the less mischievous. They amount to saying that in art technique is of no account. It is the feeling that escapes analysis, the grace that cannot be measured, the genius that transcends the rules, that distinguish the work of art from the production of mechanic skill. Given these great qualities, we can forego technical excellencies. And when the critic instinctively recognizes their presence, all he has to do is to sound the loud timbrel and make as much noise of praise and exultation as possible. When, on the contrary, he is unable to perceive anything of the kind in the picture under consideration, he is never to admit that the fault may be in him, in his imperfect understanding of the language that the painter must use. He is at liberty to damn the work offhand as a product of soulless mechanism.

And yet when a work is really excellent in technique, the fault is very likely to be in the observer who sees nothing more than technique in it. A clever man may, of course, acquire a modern master's method as easily or more easily than he could that of an old master. And his work may show cleverness and a gift for imitation only. But when the method is to any extent new, it is safe to suppose that it is the vehicle of new ideas and new sentiments, and that it is probably their very originality that prevents one from perceiving them at once. The greater number of modern paintings may be commonplace as to their motives. The same may be said of most paintings of former periods. But such an assertion cannot be truthfully made of modern art as a whole. And as for those works which merely show its influence without adding to it, is it not as reasonable to value them for what there is in them as to condemn them for not being masterpieces?

When, on the other hand, a critic goes into ecstasies over a picture full of faults such as an ordinarily clever student would be incapable of, why should the public be expected to take his praises on trust? May he not be lending, from his own stores, the large seriousness, the "souffle d'art" which he thinks he finds in the painting? If such things are there, they are embodied in lines and shades and tints, and it is his duty to lay his finger on them. He should not push his analysis so far as to divorce the spirit from the matter to which the artist has wedded it.

Indeed, if a picture is a good picture, it will be impossible for a conscientious critic so to treat it. A painter cannot think but in the terms of his art—i. e., in forms and colors, brush-strokes and touches of pigment, any more than a writer can without using words and phrases. His technique is just as essential to the one as to the other. A man, by long practice or by the force of great genius, may have such control of the means proper to his art as to be able to produce freely, without giving them particular attention; but he is all the more certain to keep his conceptions within their bounds. If he tries to paint something that is unpaintable, he is a big fool, not a big painter. The more inseparably the meaning is bound up in the technique, the more successful the picture, and, in so far, the greater.

The criticism that ignores this principle is not sound criticism, but writers who are not specialists, when they turn to criticising works of art, are very apt to ignore it. Hence it is that artists, accustomed to regard form and

meaning as one, make the best critics. Delacroix and Fromentin and Millet are among the best writers on art that the world has seen. They will hardly be accused of undervaluing the significance of a great work, nor of turning away from it because of inconsiderable technical defects. But, on the other hand, they never omit to bring forward, as the most necessary evidence of greatness, the technical points in which it is shown.

It is true that many remarkable works fall far short of perfection in some matters of technique; but they approach very close to it in others. A work may be ill-drawn, but may be grandly composed and harmoniously colored. Then it is not in the poor drawing, but in the fine color and composition that its value lies. Whether the painter's motive be simply to please the eye or to instruct and elevate the mind—whether he has sublime thoughts to express, or only his pleasure in the way the light strikes on a glazed jar, in taking the measure of his performance the execution must be considered along with the intention. In each case their ever-varying degree of relative importance must be assigned to both. But it must never be forgotten that if any intention is really visible in the picture, it is through the execution, and that to point out the former it is necessary to refer to the latter. A satisfactory critique of a painting then will not speak of it as possessing this or that quality without showing wherein the quality is visible, whether in the handling, or in the color, or in the light and shade, or in the impressiveness of the masses, or in the subtlety of the lines. It will take into account not only the height of the theme, but also the possibility of treating the subject in painting, and then the degree of the artist's success and the skill shown by him in attaining it. There should go to the work a knowledge similar at all points to that which is necessary for the artist to have, and as little as possible inferior. General culture and literary facility are not sufficient.

The art critic should be a specialist. He should go through a special course of training to fit himself for his avocation, and while he should be no less clever as a writer than he generally is at present, and should be at least as well informed on the history and politico-social relations of art, he should know something also of its practice. It would be only too easy to reckon up the few, in this country and in England, who now fulfil these requirements, and who show themselves possessed, at the same time, of the judicial temper which is not less important. As in other cases, the supply will doubtless grow with the demand, and we may yet have in English a mass of art criticism scarcely less valuable than that which exists in the French language.

TWO CURIOUS SALES.

NOTHING, remarks M. Eudel, the clever chronicler of the Hôtel Drouot, is to be obtained more cheaply than a souvenir of a literary or artistic celebrity of our own day; and if the purchaser is sharp he can generally pick up a good bargain at an artist's or author's sale. It is quite otherwise, however, with the auctioneers themselves and their experts, who, though often bitten as deeply as any with the collecting mania, have usually some method in their madness, and who have, for the rest, plenty of opportunities to discover their mistakes and to get rid of doubtful or indifferent specimens. Then they are aware of the necessity for advertising and properly cataloguing their collections, and in this respect, at least, they are always properly prepared for death. When some noted expert's treasures pass under the hammer, the Hôtel is filled with a thoroughly Parisian crowd of flâneurs, critics, amateurs, gossips, artists, actresses, and dealers. Each of these, even the most objectless at other times, has something in view.

An example of an intelligently organized sale was that of the expert Le Febvre. He took good care that it should be so. Just as some arrange in their wills the manner of their burial, he had taken the precaution to settle in his last testament every question relating to the auction of his collection. He chose the auctioneers and the experts as carefully as one would appoint guardians for a child. He bought, on purpose, ivories, enamels and majolica, which he kept "en cachette" for the purpose of exciting curiosity. He got out his catalogue, and had it illustrated with etchings so remarkably good that it is now itself an object of research. The sale took place in the principal salon of the Hôtel Drouot. Every seat was reserved; there was a full choir of criers and bidders-in, and the ceremony was carried

out with all the pomp and circumstance imaginable. The set-up prices were not left to the discretion of the auctioneers. They were to be those paid by Le Febvre, plus twenty per cent. Result: most of the pictures were sold for fifteen to fifty per cent additional. One thousand francs was asked for a sketch by Van Dyck, and 1450 was obtained. A still life of Johannes Fyt, hare, partridges, and fruit, for which 16,000 was asked, brought 22,000. There were some sacrifices, particularly of "old masters"—Le Febvre had been too partial to them. A landscape of Hobbema, well authenticated, excellent in perspective, fine in tone—the "Maison de Campagne Hollandaise"—put up at 30,000 francs, brought only 19,100. A Ruysdael brought little more than half what was asked for it. An Ostade fared worse yet. Everybody cannot be expected to feel as secure in buying old masters as an expert. Still, the paintings alone, several of them doubtful, reached a total of about \$100,000. It is fair to suppose that the old expert had not expended so much money upon them, though it is certain that he set great store by them. Having asked of an Austrian amateur one day 30,000 francs for a Teniers, the latter, it is said, stigmatized the demand as a robbery. "A robbery!" replied Le Febvre, wild with anger. "Who are you that dares speak to me so? You are count in Germany, prince in Austria, of very little consequence in your own house, and of none at all here." And he ordered his would-be customer to leave. But though of a violent temper, he knew how to take a loss with composure. He was led to risk a very large sum in an experiment in oyster culture at Grancamp. His investment proved a total loss. He informed his friends with a smile. "You will never equal me in one thing," said he; "you will never pay so dear for a dozen of oysters."

His enamels, which he had shown to but few during his life, included some very rare pieces. An oblong coffer, in form of a temple, in copper, incised and ornamented with colored enamels, thirteenth century Byzantine work, brought 8100 francs. The price asked was 6000. Another, similar in form, with pictures of Christ and the Apostles and the entry into Jerusalem, on a blue ground, French work of the thirteenth century (supposed), brought only 1400 francs. Another, with open-work crest in copper, blue ground, with ornaments and figures of angels raised and gilded, went at 1500. A bishop's staff, with a picture of the Annunciation in the volute, and the handle decorated with scales of blue enamel, with lizards in relief, was sold for 2500. There were many fine pieces of old Limoges—portraits, religious scenes and allegories—all of which brought good prices. The Italian faience, the plates of Gubbio ware with metallic reflections of ruby red and sapphire blue, cups of Urbino ware with subjects after Raphael, of Castel-Durante in brown and blue, of Hispano-Moresque with golden reflexions, and an example or two of Palissy went very high. Old Saxony porcelain, old Sèvres, every bit of bric-à-brac sold well. The total was nearly 700,000 francs.

Quite a contrast is furnished by M. Eudel's account of the "après folie" of the effects of the unfortunate caricaturist, André Gill. With a ferocious naturalism and very little show of sympathy, the chronicler rakes up a number of anecdotes about the aristocrat turned Bohemian, the satirist whose love of notoriety finally developed into madness. In a similar strain he describes the scenes at the sale. The books and pictures of the Vicomte Gosset de Guines, director of the Luxembourg under the Commune, and contributor, under his pseudonym, to all the comic journals of his time, were given away, or rather thrown away, to a mob of reporters, students, critics and artists' models. Presentation copies, from the authors, of the works of Victor Hugo, Alphonse Daudet and François Coppée, books illustrated with etchings, were sold, in packages of ten, at a dollar the package. Pictures, studies, sketches, two or three at a time, brought from five to twenty-five francs. "Whom are they by?" asked somebody. The auctioneer did not know. "Nothing is guaranteed," said he. Nobody knew what he was buying. A man took whatever was brought him, and paid what he could afford, or passed it on to his neighbor. The old hats, the red chignons, the cat-skin furs, the robes that had been to the pawn-shop, waved and rustled. Their wearers roared, screamed, whistled and sang. They criticised the auctioneer for pronouncing "Périchale" instead of "Pèrikole." He saved himself, afterward, by mumbling a word or two instead of describing the object, winding up each time with "et cetera." A few pictures and the originals of Gill's cartoons, nevertheless, brought good prices.